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ABSTRACT

One story that needs to be told in composition classes K-16 is the story of language--the "composition" class or the English class might be the only setting for most students to learn the broader picture of how language is used throughout the world in real life. To become proficient writers/speakers, students must comprehend the complex ways language is used in society: dialects, registers, global varieties of major languages, attitudes about language use, and both first language and second or multiple language acquisition. In the United States (U.S.), schools have maintained myths about language, despite strong position statements over the past 40 years acknowledging the country's linguistic diversity by most major professional language organizations. Myths perpetuate the ideas that: there is a "best" language, a "right" grammar; "language does not change"; and the U.S. is a monolingual English-speaking nation. This last myth often leads to ideas about languages other than English, especially the idea that all students should abandon other languages and non-standard dialects as they walk through the school door. Yet second language acquisition research has soundly demonstrated that if an instructional goal is reading/writing in English, nonnative speakers of English will achieve this most effectively through learning to read and write in their home language which will then transfer to English. What needs to be told is that being bilingual and/or bidialectal is an attribute, not something of which to be ashamed. One educator discusses in class what language is and is not and then explores not only English use in the US but the implications of English as a World Language or a Language of Wider Communication. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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The Imperative of Language Education in Composition Classrooms.

by Lee Thomas

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CS 217 188

THE IMPERATIVE OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN COMPOSITION CLASSROOMS

The following paper was delivered as a part of a panel presentation on April 3, 2000 at the annual Conference on College Composition and Communication in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

I regret not being here personally to deliver my paper. The reason I'm not here today is because I just underwent surgery to fuse a couple of vertebrae in my back. The surgery was completed at Seton Medical Center in Daly City, CA, and it is this medical center that provides the opening for my comments today on language education, not because of its medicine, but because of the language reality that exists at this facility. For all intents and purposes, Seton Medical Center is a trilingual hospital. English is the primary language, that is, all professional employees demonstrate proficiency in this language and most speak Spanish or Tagalog additionally. Patients interact with nurses in the language they are most comfortable in. Communication is not a major barrier here; the atmosphere is one of calm competence. This is the United States in the year 2000 in the state of California. We find the same language situation throughout the country in various communities. And, throughout the world, as English becomes the dominant international language, speakers use it as a second, third, or fourth language in all types of social and professional negotiation. Note that almost 1 in 4 people in the world today speak English at some varying level of proficiency in some setting in their everyday lives. More people in the world are bilingual than monolingual.

What does this little vignette have to do with language education in the composition classroom? As a linguist, I would say everything. Wendy Bishop, in articulating the theme of this conference, asks "What stories do we need to tell about the art(s) of teaching writing and the state-of-the-art of theory and research in our educational worlds?" I believe one story that needs to be told in composition classes K-16 is the story of language; the "composition" class or the

English class will probably be the only setting for most students to learn the broader picture of how language is used throughout the world in real-life. In order to become proficient writers or speakers, they must comprehend the complex ways language is used in society: dialects, registers, global varieties of major languages, attitudes about language use, language acquisition - both first language and second or multiple language acquisition. With an understanding of such topics, they will gain an increased awareness of the place of writing within the world of language; they will understand that most schools set up a model of writing that reflects the traditions of a very small group of people using one particular register. As you know this group of people includes the legendary prescriptive grammarians and primarily the descendants of educated male Anglos.

In the U.S., schools have by and large maintained some myths about language in our country, despite strong position statements over the past 40 years acknowledging the linguistic diversity of the nation by almost every major professional language organization. These myths continue to result in divisive and educationally unsound attitudes about the teaching of language and writing. Myth number one is a simple perpetuation of the idea that the language and writing of the small group just mentioned represents the "best" English, the "right" grammar. It's almost as if this group owns the English language; they write the style handbooks, the grammar textbooks, and the high stakes English language tests. If your English ain't like their English, then you be wrong. As critical linguist Geneva Smitherman writes "The game plan has always been linguistic and cultural absorption of the Other into the dominant culture, indoctrination of the outsiders into the existing System, to remake those on the margins in the image of the patriarch, to reshape the outsiders into talking, acting, thinking, and (to the extent possible) looking like insiders." (Smitherman, 2000, p.398). What relevance does this have in the real world, the world of Seton Medical

Center? Surely, the omission of a third person singular -s affix by a registered nurse doesn't impede communication with the patient asking for a hit of demerol. Nor does it reflect diminished medical knowledge. It would only give someone the heebiegeebies who has been taught that there is only one "right" English.

Is there really one "right" English, a dialect we refer to as Standard American English (SAE)? The best definition linguists give of SAE refers to the people speaking it and the situations in which it is used. O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, and Aronoff (1997) define Standard Language as: "The prestige variety of a language that is employed by the government and media, used and taught in educational institutions, and is the main or only written variety." (p. 687) But here as everywhere, linguists don't quite agree. Trudgill's definition (cited in Wardhaugh, 1998) reads as follows:

> Standard English is that variety of English which is usually used in print and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations. The difference between standard and non-standard, it should be noted, has nothing in principle to do with differences between formal and colloquial language, or with concepts such as "bad language". Standard English has colloquial as well as formal variants, and standard English speakers swear as much as others.
>
> (p.31)

The point I'd like to make here is that definitions such as these do not refer to intrinsic linguistic aspects of a particular variety, that is, there is nothing within the linguistic system itself that makes it the standard variety. The standard variety is simply the way the elite or prestigious segment of a population speaks and writes. So SAE is in a very real sense an idealized version of language, not a concrete exemplar. And it is fluid, it changes over time because real people speak it. Only dead languages such as Latin that have no live speakers can exist in a concrete form that can be referred to as "right" or "wrong".

Myth number one gets a little mushed together with myth number two introduced above "language doesn't change". Wrong. All languages change over time. They change to meet the needs of their speakers. The hackneyed example of this process today is computers; 50 years ago you would probably have been locked up if you ranted on and on about downloading, bites, Internet, Ethernet, etc. Besides adding and dropping new words, languages also experience syntactic changes, although this occurs less frequently. A good example of syntactic change in English today is the muddle over pronoun agreement as in the following sentence - *Everyone should take their notebooks to the study session.* Problem? *Everyone* is singular and *their* is plural, they are supposed to agree. Most college freshmen today don't bat an eyelash at this prescriptive "error"; we explain that this is because they are choosing to be sensitive to gender, that is, avoiding the prescriptive generic *he*. *Their*, then, over time takes on a singular meaning. This is an example of syntactic change responding to social dynamics. As language changes often two competing forms coexist, in this case generic *he* and singular *their*. Eventually one will die out. Teachers who have learned about language are comfortable in this situation, they tend to approach the dilemma with options and perspective, many who lack language understanding feel insecure and insist that one usage is "right" and the other "wrong".

Myth number three is that the U.S. is a monolingual English speaking nation. As my opening medical scene demonstrates, this is not true. It's not true today, and it has never been. This myth often leads to ideas about languages other than English, especially the idea that all students should abandon other languages and non-standard dialects as they walk through the school door, and if this isn't possible, then they need to be taught standard English as quickly as possible. This attitude devalues other languages and dialects and the students who speak them. It leads to the

myth of "the more English taught the better off the student will be" (Notice how this myth intertwines language use with the value of the person.) Yet, second language acquisition research has soundly demonstrated that if an instructional goal is reading and writing in English, for non-native speakers of English this will be achieved most effectively through teaching them first to read and write in their home language. The skill will then transfer to English. This is a research story that needs be told.

Let's consider some linguistic research to understand better why reading instruction in the first language will benefit second language reading acquisition. Recall that spoken language is primary, that is, all humans acquire spoken language, not all acquire literacy. Indeed, some languages today still have no written system. How is language represented in writing? Roughly, all writing can be grouped into two basic types, logographic or phonographic. Logograms represent morphemes or entire words or concepts. Chinese uses this system. English is phonographic; it uses symbols to represent sound segments or syllables. Yet, the underlying process of reading in different languages is similar. Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game in which readers use semantic and syntactic cues in addition to the print cues to construct meaning. They make predictions about text from their knowledge of spoken language and their general knowledge of the world. Miscue analysis provides a research methodology that demonstrates the predictive nature of reading.

If a reader reads *There was a glaring spotlight.* instead of what actually appears in the text *There were glaring spotlights.* (example taken from Goodman, 1979), we see evidence that the reader is processing language, not matching exactly the words written with what he or she is saying. All readers at times make such errors. Another type of evidence that demonstrates the predictive attribute of reading is seen in what we call "garden path" sentences. An example here

would be *The cotton clothing is usually made of grows in Mississippi.* (example from Pinker, 1995). The reader happily moves along the sentence until reaching *made of* and then if the reader has made the prediction that the subject in the sentence is *clothing* rather than *cotton*, the reader's eyes will be observed returning to the beginning of the sentence and a different hypothesis of meaning will be made, namely that the subject is *cotton.*

These psycholinguistic testing techniques demonstrate the guessing that goes on in reading. In all languages that have been studied, miscues occur (Goodman, 1973; Barrara, 1981; Hudelson, 1981; Chang, Hung, and Tseng, 1982 and others). The conclusion is that fluent reading is a similar process across languages and orthographies (Krashen, 1996). If that is so, then the educational goal should be to get children reading in the language they can make the best guesses in. Once learned, the reading skill will transfer to other languages. Common sense should tell us that it must be wildly frustrating for a six year old to be presented with print in a language he or she doesn't control and be told to guess at the meaning. One further note about reading. As composition teachers you are well aware of the positive relationship between reading and writing; students who read more tend to be more proficient writers. In a bilingual situation this should be no different, yet few schools today supply extensive reading materials in languages other than English for their students, even when the student population is highly Hispanic, for instance. Linguistic evidence suggests that we should reconsider this situation.

Often my students note that some immigrant children in the U.S. educational system don't become literate in any language, not Spanish or English. One can see why if submersion in English is the teaching model. Another interesting observation my students have made is that this dilemma doesn't seem to occur in Europe. Rapidly rising numbers of European students are graduating

from secondary school with strong English skills. Note that they begin their education, however, in their first language and then, once mastered, transfer the art of reading and writing to English or another second language. It is beyond the scope of this paper to cite extensive research supporting this phenomenon, but compelling work is available on the subject.

One further note about bilingual education. Many studies in the U.S. that have evaluated bilingual educational programs use the time taken to "mainstream" a child into full English medium classrooms as the mark of success. We know that it takes approximately 5 to 6 years to attain academic competency in a second language to compete with native speaking students. Students who are mainstreamed too early, e.g. after 3 years of English are at high risk of dropping out of school as they fall further and further behind. The criterion of mainstreaming may be quite misleading. A more meaningful criterion in evaluating bilingual programs would be the rate of graduation of students who began their education not proficient in English.

Many educators hold that the faster immigrant children or dialect speakers learn standard English and abandon their home language/dialect, the stronger their performance in school will be, and they will gain access to the American dream. This is an interesting belief because it is also believed by many immigrant families. The problem with this approach is that abandoning the home language too quickly leads to a breakdown in communication within the family structure. Children may lose the ability to talk to their grandparents and even their parents who have not learned as much English as their children. The result here is a frustrating and often devastating silence in the home; a complex loss of identity can follow for the child who linguistically and culturally does not really belong to the new culture nor to the family culture. One student described this feeling to me as "sitting on a fence and not knowing which way to jump" (Thomas and Cao, 1999). The high

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school drop out rate of children schooled under this attitude is very high. The story that needs to be told here is that being bilingual and/or bidialectal is an attribute, not something to be ashamed of. First generation immigrant children need to maintain their home language, and our schools should encourage their doing so.

Last year a graduate student came to me asking for some help with a situation at the school where she taught. At school soccer games, children and parents were prohibited from speaking in Spanish. This action is an extension of the attitude demonstrated in schools where teachers tell students to speak only English in the halls and everywhere else. And sadly, this history goes back to Native American children being separated from their parents and sent to boarding schools where they were punished for speaking their native language in various physical ways, e.g. soap taped into the mouth, resulting in death in one documented case.

The establishment behaviors here seem to turn into "English at any cost"; an example of linguistic imperialism for the politically minded. Such attitudes reflect a gross misunderstanding of how humans actually use language. Recall my medical center example. People will use whatever language/dialect they have available to them to get their physical, emotional, and intellectual needs met. Multilingual/dialectal people move easily in and out of their languages, codeswitching when appropriate to attain the most effective communication.

The myths I've described are so heavily entrenched in our schools that it may take our entire generation to get the attention of educational leaders and teachers to simply create awareness and some understanding of language acquisition and language use in the real world. These myths perpetuate the "There is one best English" belief, and for students' own good that's what teachers need to pound into their heads one way or another. The current "standards" and testing mania

also support these beliefs. It is frustrating to note that this very organization, 4Cs, adopted the following resolution in **1974** (see *College Composition and Communication*, Fall, 1974):

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language - the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. Such a claim leads to false advice for speakers and writers, and immoral advice for humans. A nation proud of its diverse heritage and its cultural and racial variety will preserve its heritage of dialects. We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language.

When I introduce these notions in a university class, inevitably at about this point a hand goes up and the question is asked, "Well, if we just let students use language any ole' which way, no one will understand anyone." (The Tower of Babel argument.) Lurking in the back of many students' minds is the moral argument captured as follows by radio announcer Norman Tebbit in Britain in 1985 during a major national curriculum debate

> If you allow standards to slip to the stage where good English is no better than bad English, where people turn up filthy at school ... all these things tend to cause people to have no standards at all, and once you lose standards then there's no imperative to stay out of crime.
>
> (Cameron, 1995, p. 94)

Hello???

Sociolinguist Deborah Cameron provides an entertaining yet frightening analysis of people's views of language as a moral issue in her book, *Verbal Hygiene*, from which this example is drawn. She would suggest that the underlying question my student wants to ask is "And then the whole society will just go to hell; students will be undisciplined in their work, they won't sit in straight rows in the classroom, the family will fall apart, crime rates will increase. Oh, my God what are you suggesting??" I spend the rest of the semester talking about what language *is* and

what it *isn't*.

During the rest of the semester we explore not only English use in the United States, but we consider the implications of English as a World Language or a Language of Wider Communication. Questions like "Whose English is it, anyway?" get their day. The work of Jenny Cheshire, *English Around the World*, provides an excellent overview of varieties of English developing globally. Her work examines lexical, syntactic, phonological, and even stylistic variation seen in different types of English text throughout the world. One data source is often local newspaper writing. Should the variety that appears in the media serve as the "standard" for a particular region, say, Singapore? Recall that Noah Webster documented differences between the American variety of English and British English (he also promoted a number of changes in, for example, spelling). During a growing sense of nationalism, Americans began to find identity in "their English". It is this same process that linguists are documenting around the world today with English.

The work of Braj Kachru and Larry Smith, for example, helps us understand the significant sociolinguistic settings in which English is a medium of communication. There are many speakers who use English as a second language for international communication; that is, in a business setting there may not be a single "native" speaker of English. We may observe an Indian, a Thai, a Japanese, and a German using English to transact business. Such a reality leads us to an examination of teaching methods and materials - no longer are people teaching English because students necessarily want to communicate with British, Canadian, Australian, or American native speakers of English. Culturally, they may not need knowledge of vocabulary such as *hamburger*. Larry Smith has also demonstrated that globally, it is not necessarily the "native speaker" who is

best understood by groups consisting of a variety of nationalities and using English as an additional language. His work and that of others challenges the idea that a "native speaker" of English makes the best English teacher. This work suggests that exposure to many varieties of English is the most productive way to enhance comprehensibility. Yes, that means that at our universities, international students working as TAs can provide American students with valuable language input which will help them tune in to some international usages of English.

The type of research my students consider leaves them asking, "What can we do? What should we do as composition teachers?" "How can we translate what we have learned into effective teaching approaches for students who will face World Englishes, not just one local variety?" My two colleagues here on the panel today, Heidi Estrem and Patti Hanlon, faced the classroom challenges our exploration encouraged. I think you will find the teaching approaches they developed thought provoking. Let us give them the floor.

Thank you for your attention.

The following papers described innovative approaches to the pairing of native English speaking students of composition with non-native speakers in the classroom and in the community.

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